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CROSS PATCH

Her ardent spirit ran beyond her years
As light before a flame.
At fifteen, the tennis medal; at sixteen, the golf cup;
Then—the coveted!—bluest of blue ribbons
For faultless horsemanship.
No man in all that country,
Whatever his sport,
But had to own the girl a better man.
As that she merely laughed—saying that triumph
Is all a matter of thrill: who tingles most,
He wins inevitably.
Half bewilderment, half jest,
They called her Sprite, those ordinary folk
Who thought such urge, such instinct of life to joy
Was somehow mythical.
And having named her, they no longer thought of her,
To their relief, as young or old, one sex or other—
Just herself, apart, a goddess of out-of-doors.
School boys never dreamed of her tenderly
As one to send a perfumed valentine;
But when she strode among the horses in the field
They pawed the ground.
No leash could hold a dog when she passed by.

Then, despite her ardent race with time—
Ardent as though each moment were a dare

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

To some adventure of freed muscle and thrilled nerve—
A fleeter runner overtook her flight
And bound her tightly in a golden net—
Hands, feet and bosom; lips and hair and eyes—
Beauty, beauty of women.
Or was it she, unconscious what she raced,
Ran suddenly, breathless, glad and yet dismayed,
Into the arms of her own womanhood?
Which, no one knew, herself the least of all.
But no more did she fly beyond herself,
As eager to leave the very flesh behind,
But stayed with it in deep and rapturous content;
Her ardor turned
Henceforth within upon a secret goal.
Spirit and beauty seemed to flow together,
Each rapt in each
Like a hushed lily in a hidden pool.
Only at dances did the sprite peep out,
Ardent and yet controlled,
Alive to every turn and slope of the rhythm
As if the music spread a path for her
To what she truly sought.

'Twas at a dance she found it—found the man—
And no one had to question what she found:
Her eyes, her very finger-tips, proclaimed
The marvel it was to be a part of her,
A part of love.

Cross Patch

The man—he had no medals and ribbons of triumph;
If she had fled on horse or even on foot
He never could have caught her.
It must have been his mind's humility
That made her stay,
So thoughtless of itself, so thoughtful of
Forgotten wisdoms, old greatness, world riddles;
A patient, slow, but never yielding search
(Passionate too, with wings' flight of its own)
For what—compared with other minds she knew—
Might well have seemed the blessed western isles.
They lived beyond the village on a hill
Beneath a row of pines; a house without pretense
Yet fully conscious of uncommon worth—
A house all books inside.

Their only neighbor was a garrulous man,
Who smoked a never finished pipe
Upon a never finished woodpile
Strategically placed beside the road
So none could pass without his toll of gossip.
He started it.
One day, pointing his thumb across the pines, he said:
“There's something wrong up yonder;
Their honeymoon has set behind a storm.
I heard 'em fight last night . . .
Well, what'd he expect? They're all alike—*women*.”
Of course it got about,

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

And while no one quite believed,
Still, to make sure, some friendly women called.
They said that he was studying, quite as usual,
Not changed at all, just quiet and indrawn—
The last man in the world to make a quarrel;
And she, well, of course *she* wasn't so easy to read,
Always strange and different from a child;
But even in her the sharpest eye saw nothing
That seemed the loose end of the littlest quarrel.
No couple could have acted more at ease;
And anyhow, a woman like *that*, they said,
Would never have stayed so quiet in the pines
With unhappiness, but tossed it from her broadcast
Like brands from a bonfire.
She said the house was damp—and that was all.
At last even the old garrulous woodpile
Knocked out the ashes of it from his pipe.

But then, a few months later, a frightened servant girl
Ran at early morning from the pines,
Crying the judge in town.
She said her mistress suddenly, without cause,
Standing by her in the kitchen, turned on her
Blackly with words no decent girl deserved,
Then struck her full in the face, spat on her, pulled her hair.
She wanted compensation, the servant did,
And a clean character before the world,
Yes, and punishment for the beast who hurt her—

Cross Patch

That is, if the woman wasn't mad.
Mad—oh ho! the shock of it
Rolled seething over the place like a tidal wave,
And in the wake of the wave, like weed and wreckage,
Many a hint and sense of something wrong at the pines
Sprawled in the daylight.
A stable boy remembered
How not a week before she'd called for a horse,
The spiritedest saddle they had,
And when she brought him back 'twas late at night,
The horse and woman both done up,
Slashed, splashed and dripping;
But all she said was, "Send the bill;
The beast's no good—I'll never ride again."

So this and other stories quite as strange
Stretched everybody's nerves for the trial to come
And made them furious when it didn't come—
He settling with the girl outside of court.
The judge's wife knew all there was to know:
Not jealousy at all, just nerves—
Every woman, you know, at certain times . . .
Of course, agreed the village, so that's it? still
(Not to be cheated outright), still,
Even so, she'd best take care of that temper;
A husband's one thing, an unborn child's another—
She'd always been a stormy, uncontrollable soul.
Some blamed the husband he had never reined her in,

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

Most pitied him a task impossible.
All waited the event on tiptoe—
It wasn't like other women, somehow, for her to have a child.

The months passed, no child was born.
Then other women sneered openly:
She wanted one and couldn't—served her right.
This lapse from the common law of wives
Was all the fissure the sea required
To force the dike with. Little by little then,
The pressure of year on year,
The pines and the two lives they hid
Grew dubious, then disagreeable, then at last sinister.
At this point the new generation took up
Its inheritance, the habit of myth,
And quite as a matter of course it found her hateful,
Ugly, a symbol of sudden fear by darkened paths—
Cross Patch!
And one by one the people who were young
Beside her youth, moved off or died or changed,
Forgetting her youth as they forgot their own;
Until if ever she herself
Had felt a sudden overwhelming pang
To stop some old acquaintance on the road
And stammer out, "You know—don't you—the girl I was—
I was not always *this*, was I?" she might have found
A dozen at most to know the Sprite her youth,
But none to clear the overtangled path

Cross Patch

That led from Sprite to Cross Patch ; not one, not one,
But looking back would damn
The very urge of joy in Sprite, and all its ardent spirit
For having mothered Cross Patch ; not one, not one,
To see the baffled womanhood she was,
Orphan of hopes too bright, not mother of evil.
And thus besieged on all sides by the present
She fought against all sides, as if by fury
To force one way to yield.

For both it was a nightmare, not a life, and neither
Could well have told how it had ever begun ;
But once begun it seemed inevitable,
A storm that settled darkly round their souls,
Unwilled as winter,
With moan of wind through sere and barren boughs
And skies forever masked.
The first blow of the quarrel had been hers,
A blow unguessed by either, for she struck
Like nature, not to hurt but to survive.
But wrath accrued
So soon thereafter that the blow seemed angry,
And she struck out again with eyes and tongue
Pursuing him, the angrier at his grief,
Until in sheer defense he hit
Not at herself, but at her blows, to ward them ;
Keeping the while
His thought above the dark upon a star or so

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

Fixed in the past. But she defended her wrath
As part of her dignity and right: they stormed
Up, up the hill and down,
Increasing darkness to the end of life.
Of him friends said
He seemed like a lonely sentinel
Posted against the very edge of doom,
Whom no watch came relieving.
"She'll kill him yet, the fool!" the woodpile's verdict
Before the pipe went out for the last time,
Leaving the pines unneighbored.

But he was wrong, the urn outlasted the flame.
One night, hands at her throat, she came
And knelt before him, timidly reaching out
And trying to speak, to *speak*—struggling as if words
Were something still to learn.
At last speech broke from her, so agonized
He hardly knew if it were supreme wrath or supreme sup-
plication:
"*You did not love me . . .*"
And as he bent to her he felt
Her girlhood cry, a murdered thing returned.
He hoped that it was wrath, as easier to endure,
Feeling it burn from mind to heart, from heart to soul,
Gathering more awe, more terror, at each advance.
Like a priest with sacrifice it passed
The colonnades of his thought, entering without pause

Cross Patch

An unknown altar of his being
Behind a curtain never moved before.
“*You did not love me . . .*”
Both gazed upon the sacrifice held up
As though it were the bleeding heart of their own lives
Somehow no longer their own.

And then the priest returned, slowly, pace by pace,
Out of the hush of feeling into the hush of thought.
It was the priest and not himself, the man believed,
Who like an echo, not less agonized,
Whispered across the waste of many lives,
Whispering “No . . .”

Whose heart, the man’s or woman’s, lowest stooped
To raise the other prostrate heart aloft
With supplication and consolement, urging it
To live—*oh, live!*—dying itself the while,
God knew before the beginning of the world.
We only know that stooping so, dust turned to dust,
All hearts meet at last.

Horace Holley